

reading, was no doubt of value to society, and laid on those who afterwards broke up the abbeys the moral duty of founding new educational establishments on a more liberal basis, a duty which was notoriously ill fulfilled. But as the latest researches have shown, these monastic schools were, at most, an extremely small part of the educational system of the country, even as regards elementary teaching.<sup>1</sup>

The copying of manuscripts was also of great service to future generations. The invention of printing had not yet removed this demand. In the reign of Richard the Second, large numbers of penmen were undoubtedly necessary, but transcriptions were not at this period made in monasteries alone. The monks had, indeed, originally developed, if not invented, the beautiful art of illumination; but in the later fourteenth century, a very large proportion of copies were not made in the cloister. The exact amount of service rendered by the monasteries in this way could only be determined by an extremely difficult investigation into the origin of all extant manuscripts. The question would have to be raised, what class of books did the monks of this period preserve for us? Do we owe the works of chief interest, such as Chaucer, 'Piers Plowman' and Froissart, to their well-spent leisure, or to professional transcribers?

In original work the monks of this age were certainly sterile. It might be expected, if we did not consider the narrowing influence of the life they led, that so many thousand persons, enjoying such full opportunities for literature, would among them produce some one work of real value. But the great names in that first age of English authorship are none of them those of monks. Chaucer was a layman, Langland a clerk in minor orders, Wycliffe an Oxford man; even the theological opponents who arose against him were friars. The only native production of the monasteries were the Chronicles. These carried on the tradition of former centuries, that a great abbey should have a historiographer to note down, as they occurred, the affairs of the nation, and more particularly

<sup>1</sup> See Mr. A. F. Leach's *English Schools at the Reformation*, 15-9; and *Harrow School* (Arnold, 1898), p. 12, lines 14-23, article on Grammar Schools, by Rev. Hastings Rashdall.